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ABSTRACT

The 1988 presidential campaign provoked a flurry of popular press criticism directed at the heavy use by television news of short "sound bites" from candidates. A study examined the following questions: (1) Has the number of sound bites in network evening newscasts increased over the past 20 years? (2) Has the length of the average sound bite decreased over the same time period? (3) Has the proportion of newscast time devoted to sound bites changed? (4) If these changes have occurred, are the changes similar for campaign and non-campaign stories? (5) Has the amount of newscast time devoted to campaign coverage changed? and (6) Are the changes that have occurred correlated with technological developments? Abstracts and tapes of newscasts of the final full week of each presidential campaign from 1968 to 1988 were content analyzed. Results showed that the use of sound bites has nearly tripled over the past 20 years; that sound bites are getting shorter--in 1988 they were only one third as long as the average in 1968; that the proportion of time in the typical newscast devoted to sound bites decreased about nine percent from 1968 to 1988; that campaign stories tend to have considerably more sound bites than other domestic stories; that campaign news dominated the nightly news in the final week before the election in each of the years analyzed; and that technological changes have driven the trend to more, shorter sound bites. (Six tables of data are included and 17 references are attached.) (SR)

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The Shrinking Sound Bite:

Two Decades of Stylistic Evolution in Television News

by

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Abstract

The recent presidential campaign provoked a flurry of criticism directed at the use by television news of short "sound bites" from candidates. This study assesses the historical evolution of the sound bite in television journalism. It confirms that sound bites have shrunk in length, but shows they also have increased dramatically in number. It assesses technological reasons for the change and outlines strategies for further research to determine the effect of the shift.

The Shrinking Sound Bite:
Two Decades of Stylistic Evolution in Television News

Abstract

The recent presidential campaign provoked a flurry of popular press criticism directed at the heavy use by television news of short "sound bites" from candidates. This study uses abstracts and tapes from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to assess the historical evolution of the sound bite in network television journalism. It confirms that sound bites have shrunk -- roughly to a third of their length 20 years ago. But the study also shows that sound bites have roughly tripled in number over the same time period. Political campaign stories tend to have more sound bites than stories on other subjects. The study also found that, despite the shifts in sound bite usage, there's been no parallel shift in the amount of time devoted to campaign coverage, at least during the late-campaign period studied. The study assesses technological reasons for the change in sound-bite usage and outlines strategies for further research to determine the effect of the shift on viewer interest in and learning from news broadcasts.

One issue that arose from media coverage of last year's presidential campaign was the impact on the election of television's desire for sound bites -- brief, pungent comments from the candidates. "Sound-bite journalism" has become an all-purpose term of opprobrium for media critics.[1] A phrase that began as arcane craft jargon for broadcasters has so much entered the popular lexicon that it's showing up in political cartoons.[2] As ABC correspondent Jeff Greenfield said of the '88 campaign shortly after it ended, "So consistent has the outcry been over the tone and nature of that campaign that every 6-year-old schoolchild now knows the phrases 'sound bite' and 'photo ops.'"(Greenfield, 1989)

Much of the criticism isn't really about sound bites themselves -- after all they are just broadcasting's version of a newspaper's direct quotation. It's largely directed at the manipulation of the media by candidates who offer up the punchy quotes, but avoid substantive discussion of the issues. (Boot, 1989)

But another part of the critique suggests that sound bites are part of the problem, that they've gotten much shorter in recent years and now are so short as to be be incapable of furthering rational

[1]See, for example, Siegel, E.; "Television: Cashing in on class lines?" Boston Sunday Globe; Jan. 15, 1989, p.A15.

[2]See, for example, the Doonesbury strip and the Doug Marlette editorial cartoon used to illustrate Boot (1989).

discussion. This critique suggests that the networks -- in their demand for short sound bites -- are as much to blame as the candidates who seek to satisfy that demand for their own advantage.

Lacking from this part of the critique has been much empirical evidence to establish whether sound bites in fact are shrinking. One study quoted by NBC[3] suggested that the average sound bite in the 1984 campaign ran less than 14 seconds and that by 1988 the average length had shrunk to 9.6 seconds. A new broadcast news text (Shook, 1989) suggests that sound bites should run 5 to 15 seconds. But a search of academic journals in the field has failed to turn up any studies on the subject.

In addition, it appears no attention has been paid to an important related question -- is the number of sound bites increasing or decreasing? *Shorter* sound bites wouldn't mean less time for candidates to get their messages across if the *number* of sound bites increased correspondingly.

This study was devised to answer the following research questions:

1. Has the number of sound bites in network evening newscasts increased over the past 20 years?

[3]NBC Sunday Night News, Mar. 26, 1989. The figures were presented as a tag to a Douglas Kiker "Kiker's Capital" report on "Talking Heads" without further attribution. Calls to Kiker and the story's producer, Chris Mishon, seeking details about the study were not returned.

2. Has the length of the average sound bite decreased over the same time period?

3. Has the proportion of newscast time devoted to sound bites changed?

4. If these changes have occurred, are the changes similar for campaign and non-campaign stories?

5. Has the amount of newscast time devoted to campaign coverage changed?

6. Are whatever changes have occurred correlated with technological developments, such as the introduction of video tape technology as a replacement for film in news gathering from the field?

Method

This study used two different strategies to assess whether the use of sound bites in television news has changed over the past 20 years. Both involved the use of resources of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, which began taping network newscasts in 1968.

The first strategy involved a content analysis of data from the written newscast abstracts produced by the archive. The final full week of each presidential campaign from 1968 through 1988 was selected as the period for analysis, and all Monday through Friday newscasts for those weeks were analyzed.

The purposive choice of the final week of the campaign assured that the campaign would not be pushed off the news agenda by other events and therefore that a substantial amount of campaign coverage would be available, providing comparable data for each year. A randomly constructed sample week spread across the entire campaign might provide a more accurate assessment of the campaign-long balance between campaign and non-campaign coverage, but at the risk of yielding a much smaller sampling of campaign coverage for study, and with more chance variations from year to year. Since the study focused primarily on style and techniques of coverage rather than the amount of campaign coverage relative to other news, the final week purposive sample strategy was selected.

The abstracts indicate each story's topic, its length, and which combination of anchor(s) and reporter(s) presented it. Where the abstracts listed two or more field reporters under a single topic heading, this study, for clarity's sake, treated each reporter's report, or package, as a separate story. All stories, including ones without film or videotape, were coded.

The abstracts also indicate who spoke on camera during the story, but provide no indication of how long they spoke. To fill in that gap, a more detailed analysis of a smaller sampling of tapes tapes from the newscast archive was undertaken. The sampling involved coding whether each shot from each story containing film or video tape in the three network newscasts on the Tuesday one week before the election in 1968 and 1988 was a sound bite. The smaller sample size was necessitated by the cost of acquiring the tapes and the much greater time required to code from the tapes than from the written abstracts.

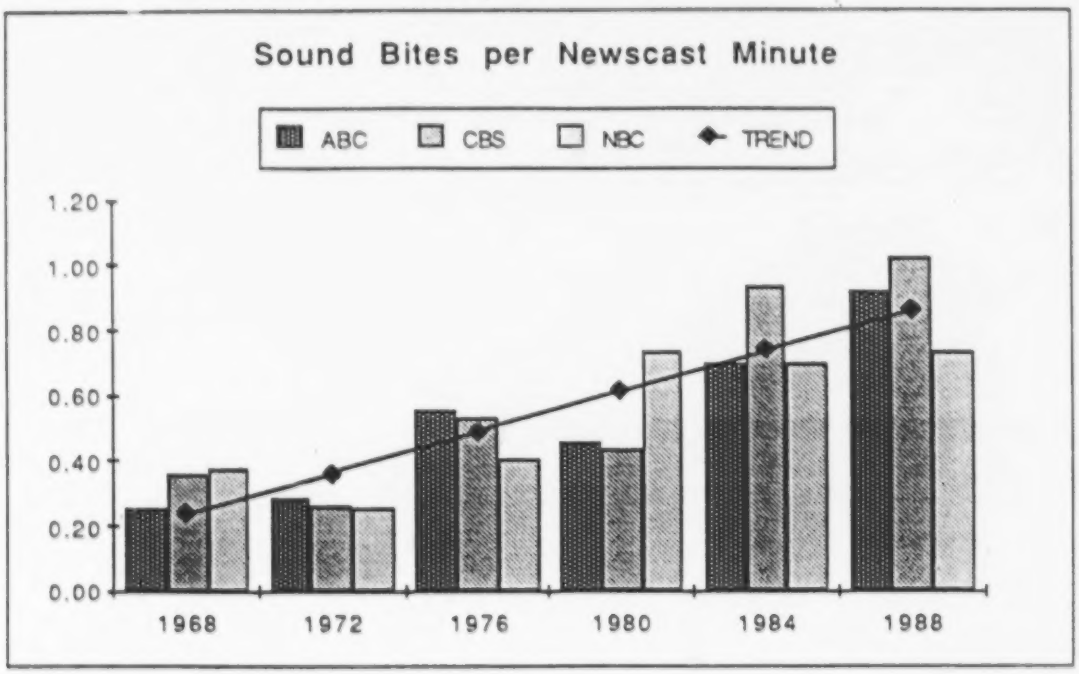
The first sample, of 270 newscasts, with the story as the unit of analysis, yielded a total of 1330 stories containing 1383 sound bites. The second sample, of 6 newscasts, with the shot as the unit of analysis, yielded a sample of 718 shots of which 124 were sound bites.

The coding was conducted by the author assisted by two graduate student research assistants. Using Holsti's formula as described in Wimmer & Dominick (1987), intercoder reliability was calculated at 98 percent.

Results

The use of sound bites has increased

The number of sound bites in network evening newscasts has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, nearly tripling during that time.



While the increase has not been absolutely linear, the trend has been fairly consistent. A calculation of the Pearson correlation coefficient, using the three-network average for each year, yielded r=+0.96, close to the maximum positive correlation of +1.00. It must be remembered, of course, that correlation does not establish causation, and since the mere passage of time is unlikely to cause an increase in a phenomenon like sound-bite use, we must look elsewhere for the cause. More about that later in the paper.

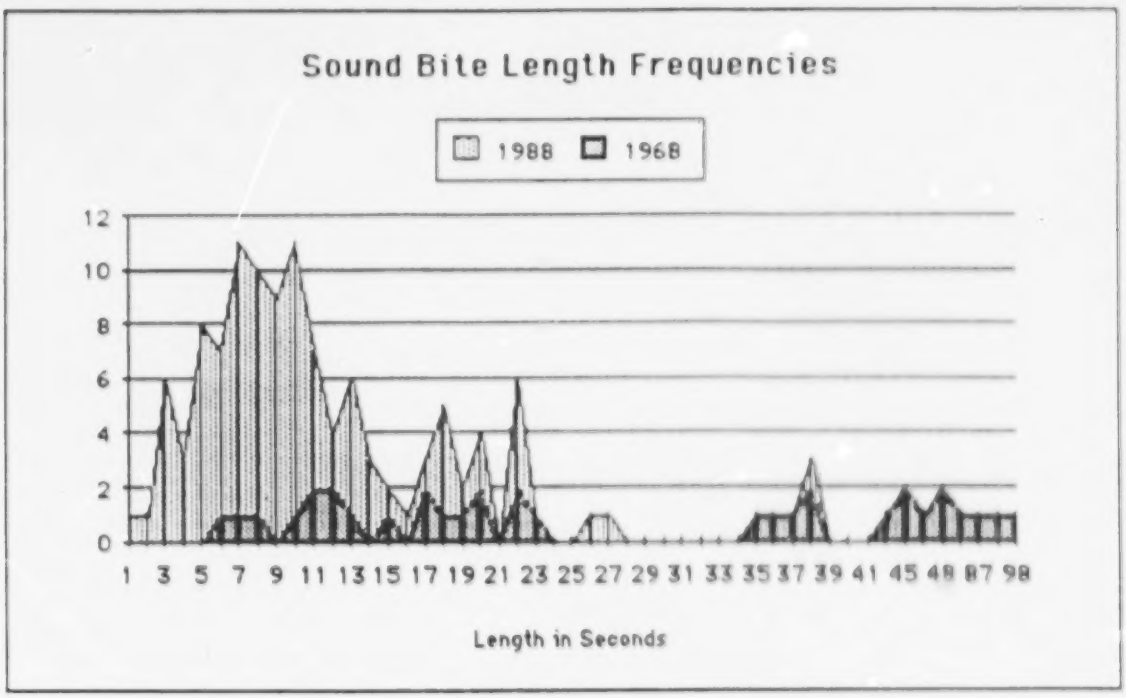
Several previous studies have suggested a high level of agreement

among network (Riffe, 1986) and local (Atwater, 1986) broadcasters about what stories are news. This study suggests, as indicated by Chart 1, that the networks, at least, also substantially agree on certain presentation techniques.

Sound bites are getting shorter

In a mirror image of the increase in the number of sound bites, the length of the typical newscast sound bite in the 1988 sample was 10.3 seconds, only a third as long as the average 31.5 second sound bite from 1968. But consistent with the results from analysis of the transcripts, the number of sound bites in the tape sample grew from just over 11 per newscast in 1968 to just under 32 per newscast in 1988.[4]

[4]Each shot in which someone other than the reporter was seen and clearly heard speaking was treated as a separate sound bite. A shot interrupted by "b-roll" or cover video, therefore, would be counted as two sound bites. This results in a somewhat higher total count for sound bites for the tape analysis than for the same days from the abstracts, which don't clearly indicate individual shots.



The biggest change in sound bite length has come at the extremes of the range. Very long sound bites, which were fairly common in 1968, appeared not at all in the sample from 20 years later. By contrast, no extremely short sound bites were found in the 1968 sample, while some did appear in 1988. One way of illustrating this is to note that the median sound bite length in 1968, the point on the distribution at which half were longer and half shorter, was 17 seconds, while the mean, or mathematically computed average, was 31.5 seconds. By contrast, the 1988 median is 9 seconds while the mean is 10.3.

Here's an example of what happened at the longer end. On the Tuesday before election day in 1968, Sen. Eugene McCarthy, who had

lost the fight for the Democratic presidential nomination, belatedly announced that he would vote for the party's nominee, Sen. Hubert Humphrey. All three networks led with McCarthy's announcement. The only film presented showed McCarthy standing at a podium speaking, plus a few cutaway shots of technicians recording the event. Yet each network devoted an average of nearly two minutes of film time to the story, with the longest single sound bites running 42 seconds on ABC, 87 on CBS and 98 on NBC.

By contrast, on the Tuesday before election day in 1988, NBC led with a one-on-one interview by anchor Tom Brokaw with the Democratic presidential candidate, Gov. Michael Dukakis. Although the tape ran nearly as long as the total film time all three networks combined devoted to the McCarthy story 20 years earlier, the longest of the many sound bites in the Dukakis interview ran 38 seconds.

At the other end of the spectrum, none of the 1968 sound bites were less than 6 seconds long, while 20 percent of the 1988 sound bites were that short.

ABC's Dean Reynolds, covering the Israeli election last year, found a woman drawn to vote for Likud because of the party's promise to hold onto occupied land forever. Her feelings were summed up in two back-to-back sound bites, one running just over 2 seconds, the other just over 1 second.

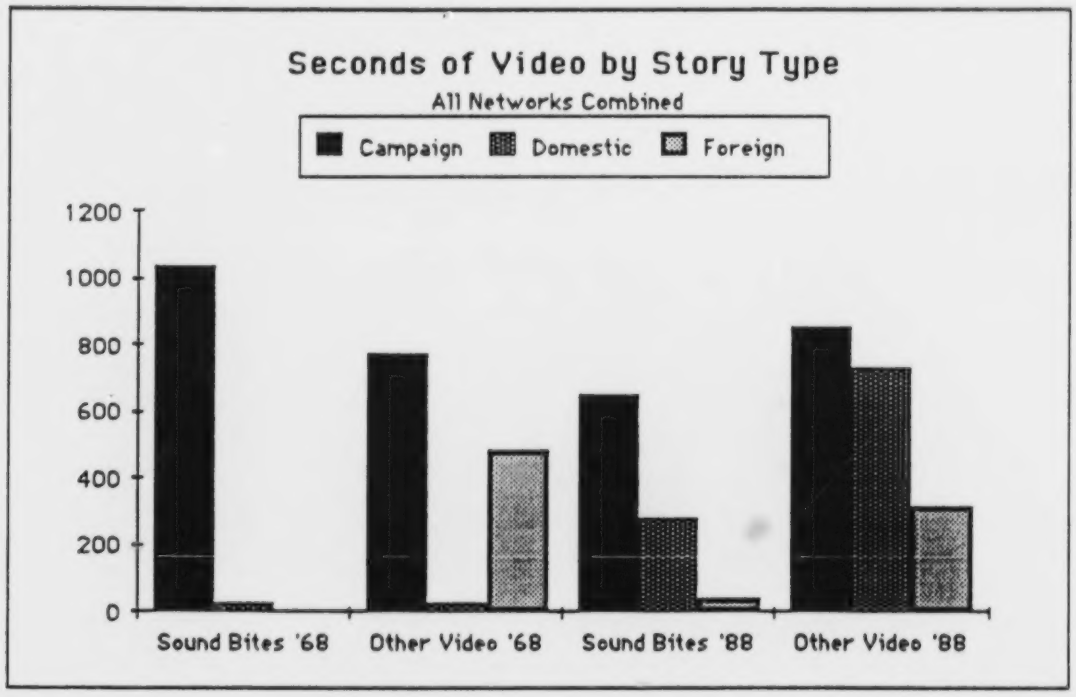
Cut #1: "These Arabs think this is their home; this is my home."

Cut #2: "They have to leave; not me."

The camera framing varied enough so juxtaposing the two shots did not create a jump cut effect.

Proportion of newscast time devoted to sound bites

The analysis of the tapes indicates the amount of time in the typical newscast devoted to sound bites decreased about 9 percent, from 357 seconds in 1968 to 325 seconds in 1988. This occurred despite a 40 percent increase in the total amount of film or tape used, from an average of 683 seconds in 1968 to 961 in 1988.

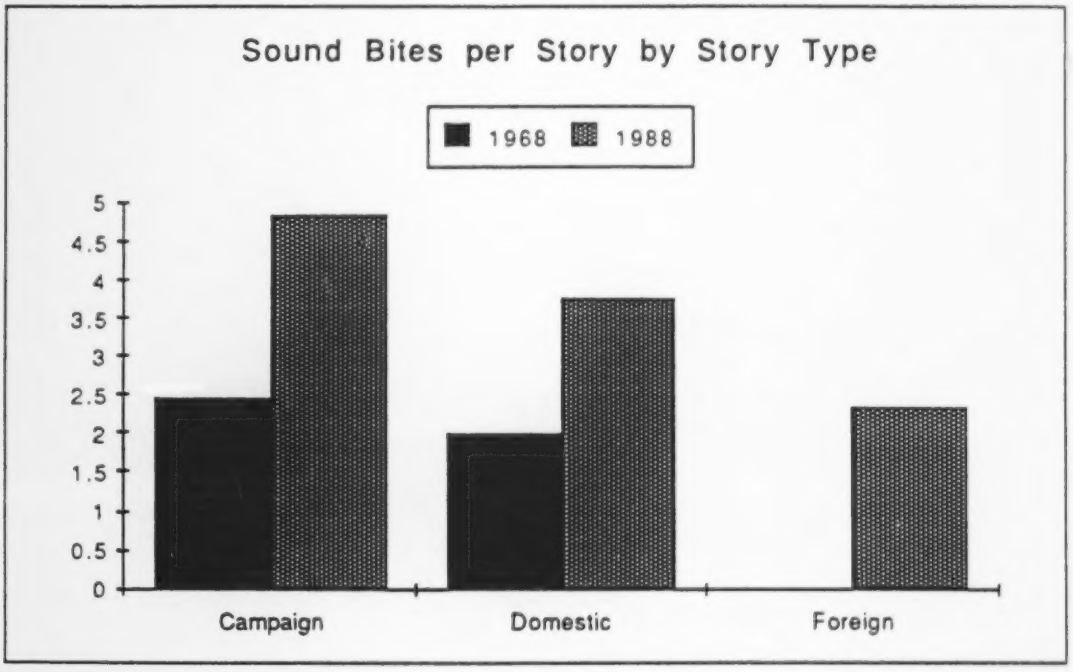


The proportion of sound-bite time devoted to campaign coverage[5] decreased from 97 percent in 1968 to 67 percent in 1988. But this statistic should be interpreted with caution. In the 1968 sample most of the non-campaign stories were from foreign locales and dealt with subjects, a protest demonstration in Czechoslovakia, for instance, that made getting English-language sound bites difficult. The 1988 newscasts had a higher proportion of domestic non-campaign stories with tape, and the only foreign tape story, on the Israeli election, featured several sound bites with English-speaking sources.

Campaign stories have more sound bites

Both the abstracts and the tapes indicate that campaign stories tend to have considerably more sound bites than other domestic stories, which in turn have more sound bites than foreign stories. This presumably is due to the "talky" nature of campaign stories, and, as suggested above, the relative difficulty of finding English-speaking sources abroad.

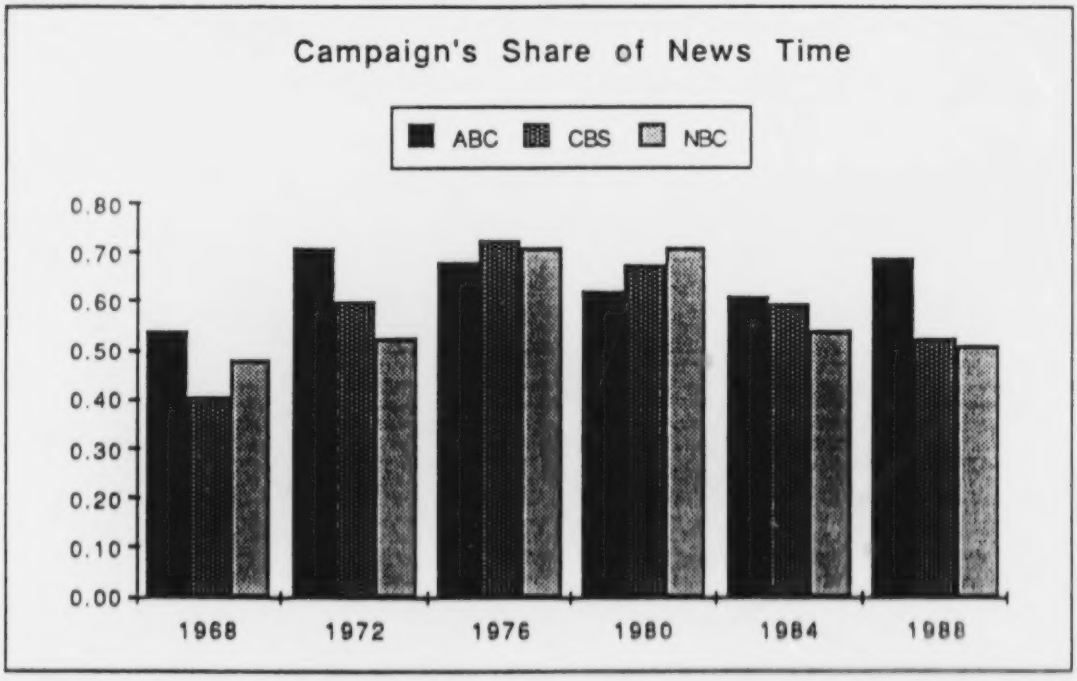
[5]Any story dealing with the presidential or vice-presidential campaign, or other contests to be decided in the same balloting, were treated as campaign stories, whether the candidates appeared on camera or not. As an example, 1968 stories about Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder's oddsmaking on the election counted as campaign stories.



(Note also Chart "Sound Bites per Minute by Story Type" below.)

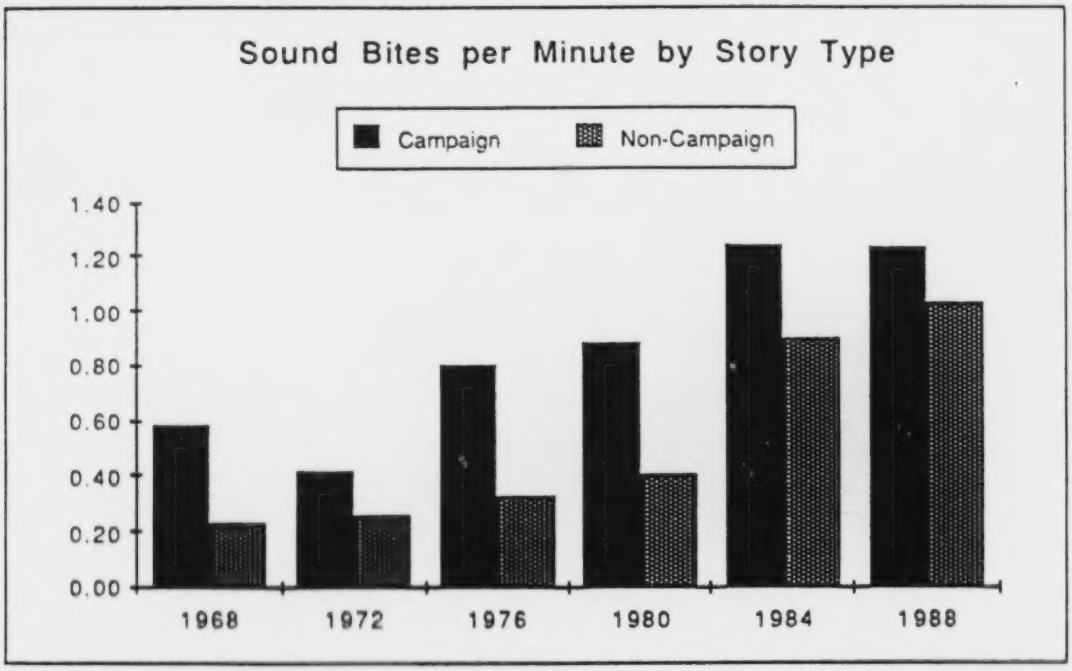
Campaign's share of news time

As would be expected, campaign news dominated the nightly newscasts in the final week before the election in each of the years analyzed. The coverage was highest in 1976 and 1980, the two campaigns which led to defeats of incumbent presidents. A comparison of these figures with the "conventional wisdom" about whether the election was "all wrapped up" the week before the balloting might prove interesting.



Technology as a factor in change

The first campaign year in which portable video tape cameras and recorders, and the associated editing equipment, were available to the networks was 1976 (Powell, 1987). Since the new video equipment was in short supply, it was generally assigned to crews covering the presidential candidates, since competitive time pressures were highest there. Thus a comparison of the use of sound bites in campaign coverage for 1972 and 1976 provides an interesting test of the hypothesis that technological changes have driven the trend to more, shorter sound bites.



In 1972 the network campaign stories in the week sampled had an average of .42 sound bites per minute. In 1976 the average was .79 per minute. A statistical *t*-test applied to the individual network averages, using the procedure described by Wimmer, yields t=-4.46, which, for a one-tailed test, is significant at the .01 level.

Testing for when non-campaign coverage shifted to video tape, and for when satellite newsgathering displaced telephone land-line transmission would probably yield similar results.

Discussion

Technological developments like the shift to video tape enable

change -- make it possible to do things differently -- but rarely compel those changes in behavior. It would appear that broadcast network professionals believe that shorter sound bites are in their interest.

That interest most bluntly can be defined as maintaining audience attention so the audience is still around to be delivered to the advertiser at the next commercial break. More altruistically, the interest may be in delivering information in a way that will stimulate the audience to learn more from the program.

Strategies for further research

Research to determine attitudes among professionals toward the shorter sound bites and their rationale for using them would be helpful.[6] Studies might also be done to assess whether sound bites can be made still shorter than they already are and be intelligible, or whether a limit to the shrinkage now has been reached. Beyond that, there is a need for studies that assess the effectiveness of short sound bites versus longer ones in achieving both the crass and the noble goals of television news, since a strategy that's billed as achieving increased learning from the news is unlikely to be adopted, especially if it costs money, unless it can also be shown that it will result in an increase in the size of the

[6]Not all professionals think they're great. The late CBS News executive Burton Benjamin is quoted by Powell (1987) as saying "Are we in danger of emulating MTV with NTV--News TV? What does it profit you when no shot is longer than three seconds and the total is zero?"

audience.

Unfortunately, there are relatively few examples from studies of related topics to guide this research. For the most part, studies that have examined learning from television news have not examined interest level.

Beyond that, there's a relative shortage of studies that consider the visual aspect of television news at all. Doris Graber (1987), in reviewing the research agenda for the 1988 election campaign, suggested that much political science election research "rests on shaky theoretical foundations." Among the assumptions she cited as "patently unrealistic" is the one that: "When watching television, voters attend only to the spoken words, ignoring pictures and other non-verbal information. Hence it is sufficient to restrict content analysis to verbal portions of television newscasts."

While that assessment appears to be largely accurate, a few researchers have considered visual content. For example, Brosius (1989) studied the impact of the inclusion of still pictures in a newscast. He found that, for some measures of learning, the visuals helped, but on other measures the results were insignificant. Katz (1977) found that viewers who watched television learned more from the program than those who only listened to it. Drew (1984) determined that children learned more from TV newscasts with film than when the same script was presented aurally without the film. Son (1986) determined that conveying the same information visually

and verbally increased viewer recall over a non-redundant presentation. McDaniel (1973) even managed to consider interest level as well as learning from the news, and concluded that the desirability of film depends on the nature of the story covered. But, except for Son, even these studies tended to look at film as unitary concept -- not differentiating particular styles of film presentation. Nonetheless, they provide a valuable base for further study.

In testing whether longer or shorter sound bites result in more learning, another factor that should be controlled, but sometimes is not, is the total time devoted to the learning task. For example, Perloff (1982) suggests that adding recaps to a newscast increases the ability to recall news content, but does not make clear how much longer, if at all, the newscast with the recaps was. If longer sound bites don't increase learning by more than their greater length alone would predict, then they aren't really effective in a world where there is a superabundance of news vying for the public's attention.

Clearly, one difficulty researchers have faced is obtaining comparable examples of professional video work for study that could be manipulated experimentally without making it very unlike a professional presentation. The study of changes in sound-bite use over time may have an advantage in that regard, in that the historical record of newscasts in the Vanderbilt archive provides a wide selection of treatments of similar stories over time from which to choose.

Film researchers have contributed analyses that should prove useful in future research into sound bites and other aspects of television news video. For example, studies of shot length (but not specifically sound-bite length) have been conducted on network dramatic series. In one, Porter (1987) examined six episodes of *Hill Street Blues* and found a wide variation in the number of shots per minute -- even among shows directed by the same person. Tiemens (1988) studied differences in the visual content of Jesse Jackson's speech to the 1984 Democratic national convention as presented on the broadcast networks and two cable channels. Kipper (1986) concluded that camera motion aids viewers in learning about the physical properties of a scene.

It's hoped this study will spark further inquiry into the effects of different editing strategies in television news.

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